



.

PAPILLON



HENRI CHARRIÈRE

---

# Papillon

Translated from the French by  
PATRICK O'BRIAN

Rupert Hart-Davis • London 1970



To the people of Venezuela,  
to the humble fishermen of the Gulf of Paria,  
to all those, intellectuals, soldiers and others  
who gave me my chance to make a new life.

To Rita, my wife, my best friend.



## CONTENTS

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION	<i>Page</i> 9
FIRST EXERCISE-BOOK: Down the Drain	19
SECOND EXERCISE-BOOK: On the way to Guiana	49
THIRD EXERCISE-BOOK: First Break	81
FOURTH EXERCISE-BOOK: First Break (continued)	123
FIFTH EXERCISE-BOOK: Back to Civilization	191
SIXTH EXERCISE-BOOK: The Iles du Salut	259
SEVENTH EXERCISE-BOOK: The Iles du Salut (continued)	323
EIGHTH EXERCISE-BOOK: Back to Royale	365
NINTH EXERCISE-BOOK: Saint-Joseph	401
TENTH EXERCISE-BOOK: Devil's Island	433
ELEVENTH EXERCISE-BOOK: Farewell to Penal	487
TWELFTH EXERCISE-BOOK: Georgetown	495
THIRTEENTH EXERCISE-BOOK: Venezuela	539





## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

ALL this last year France has been talking about Papillon, about the *phénomène Papillon*, which is not merely the selling of very large numbers of an unusually long book, but the discovery of a new world and the rediscovery of a kind of direct, intensely living narrative that has scarcely ever been seen since literature became self-conscious.

The new world in question is of course the underworld, seen from within and described with extraordinary natural talent by one who knows it through and through and who accepts its values, which include among others courage, loyalty and fortitude. But this is the real underworld, as different from the underworld of fiction as the act of love is different from adolescent imaginings, a world the French have scarcely seen except here and there in the works of Jean Genet and Albertine Sarrazin, or the English since Defoe; and its startling fierce uncompromising reality, savagely contemptuous of the Establishment, has shocked and distressed many a worthy bourgeois. Indeed, we have a minister's word for it (a minister, no less) that the present hopeless moral decline of France is due to the wearing of miniskirts and to the reading of Papillon.

Nevertheless all properly equipped young women are still wearing miniskirts, in spite of the cold, and even greater numbers of Frenchmen with properly equipped minds are still reading Papillon, in spite of the uncomfortable feelings it must arouse from time to time. And this is one of the most striking things about the *phénomène Papillon*: the book makes an immense appeal to the whole range of men of good will, from the Académie française to the cheerful young mason who is working on my bouse. The literary men are the most articulate in their praise, and I will quote from François Mauriac, the most literary and articulate of them all, for his praise sums up all the rest and expresses it better. This piece comes from his *Bloc-notes* in the *Figaro littéraire*.

I had heard that it was a piece of oral literature, but I do not agree at all: no, even on the literary plane I think it an extraordinarily talented book. I have believed that there is no great success, no overwhelming success, that is undeserved. It always has a deep

underlying reason . . . I think that *Papillon's* immense success is in exact proportion to the book's worth and to what the author has lived through. But another man who had had the same life and had experienced the same adventures would have produced nothing from it at all. This is a literary prodigy. Merely having been a transported convict and having escaped does not mean a thing: you have to have talent to give this tale its ring of truth. It is utterly fascinating reading. This new colleague of ours is a master!

A thing that struck me very much in the book is that this man, sentenced for a killing that he did not commit . . . takes a very sanguine view of mankind. At the beginning of his first escape he was taken in and given shelter on a lepers' island. The charity these most unfortunate, most forsaken of men showed to the convicts is truly wonderful. And it was the lepers who saw to it that they were saved. The same applies to the way they were welcomed in Trinidad and at Curaçao, not as criminals but as men who deserved admiration for having made that voyage aboard a nutshell. There is this human warmth all round them, and all through the book we never forget it. How different from those bitter, angry, disgusted books—Céline's, for example.

Man's highest virtues are to be found in what is called the gutter, the underworld; and what gangsters do is sometimes the same as what heroes do. I have already confessed that when I am very low in my mind I read detective stories. In these books, where everything is made up, the human aspect of the characters, the 'humanity', is appalling. But in *Papillon's* tale, which is true, we meet a humanity that we love in spite of its revolting side. This book is a good book, in the deep meaning of the word.

When one has read a little way into *Papillon* one soon comes to recognize the singular truthfulness of the writing, but at first some readers, particularly English readers, wonder whether such things can be; and so that no time, no pleasure, should be lost, a certain amount of authentication may be in place.

Henri Charrière was born in 1906, in the Ardèche, a somewhat remote district in the south of France where his father was the master of a village school. After doing his military service in the navy, Charrière went to Paris, where, having acquired the nickname of *Papillon*, he soon carved himself out a respected place in the underworld; he had an

intuitive perception of its laws and standards, and he respected them scrupulously. Papillon was not a killer at that time, but he fell foul of the police and when he was taken up on the charge of murdering a ponce he was convicted. The perjury of a witness for the prosecution, the thick stupidity of the jury, the utter inhumanity of the prosecuting counsel, and the total injustice of the sentence maddened him, for like many of his friends he had a far more acute sense of justice than is usual in the bourgeois world. What is more, the sentence was appallingly severe—transportation to the penal settlements in French Guiana and imprisonment for life without a hope of remission: and all this at the age of twenty-five. He swore he would not serve it, and he did not serve it. This book is an account of his astonishing escapes from an organization that was nevertheless accustomed to holding on to thousands of very tough and determined men, and of the adventures that were the consequences of his escapes. But it is also a furious protest against a society that can use human beings so, that can reduce them to despair and that can for its own convenience shut them up in dim concrete cells with bars only at the top, there to live in total silence upon a starvation diet until they are tamed, driven mad or physically destroyed—killed. The horrible, absolutely convincing account of his years in solitary confinement is very deeply moving indeed.

After years on the run, years of being taken and then escaping again even though he was on the 'very dangerous' list, Papillon finally got away from Devil's Island itself, riding over many miles of sea to the mainland on a couple of sacks filled with coconuts. He managed to reach Venezuela, and eventually the Venezuelans gave him his chance, allowing him to become a Venezuelan citizen and to settle down to live in Caracas as quietly as his fantastic vitality would allow.

It was here that he chanced upon Albertine Sarrazin's wonderful *l'Astragale* in a French bookshop. He read it. The red band round the cover said *123rd thousand*, and Papillon said, 'It's pretty good: but if that chick, just going from hideout to hideout with that broken bone of hers, could sell 123,000 copies, why, with my thirty years of adventures, I'll sell three times as many.' He bought two schoolboy's exercise books with spiral bindings and in two days he filled them. He bought eleven more, and in a couple of months they too were full.

It is perhaps this extraordinary flow that accounts for some of the unique living quality of the book. A professional writer who puts down between one and two thousand words a day is doing very well:

underlying reason . . . I think that *Papillon's* immense success is in exact proportion to the book's worth and to what the author has lived through. But another man who had had the same life and had experienced the same adventures would have produced nothing from it at all. This is a literary prodigy. Merely having been a transported convict and having escaped does not mean a thing; you have to have talent to give this tale its ring of truth. It is utterly fascinating reading. This new colleague of ours is a master!

A thing that struck me very much in the book is that this man, sentenced for a killing that he did not commit . . . takes a very sanguine view of mankind. At the beginning of his first escape he was taken in and given shelter on a lepers' island. The charity these most unfortunate, most forsaken of men showed to the convicts is truly wonderful. And it was the lepers who saw to it that they were saved. The same applies to the way they were welcomed in Trinidad and at Curaçao, not as criminals but as men who deserved admiration for having made that voyage aboard a nutshell. There is this human warmth all round them, and all through the book we never forget it. How different from those bitter, angry, disgusted books—Céline's, for example.

Man's highest virtues are to be found in what is called the gutter, the underworld; and what gangsters do is sometimes the same as what heroes do. I have already confessed that when I am very low in my mind I read detective stories. In these books, where everything is made up, the human aspect of the characters, the 'humanity', is appalling. But in *Papillon's* tale, which is true, we meet a humanity that we love in spite of its revolting side. This book is a good book, in the deep meaning of the word.

When one has read a little way into *Papillon* one soon comes to recognize the singular truthfulness of the writing, but at first some readers, particularly English readers, wonder whether such things can be; and so that no time, no pleasure, should be lost, a certain amount of authentication may be in place.

Henri Charrière was born in 1906, in the Ardèche, a somewhat remote district in the south of France where his father was the master of a village school. After doing his military service in the navy, Charrière went to Paris, where, having acquired the nickname of *Papillon*, he soon carved himself out a respected place in the underworld: he had an

intuitive perception of its laws and standards, and he respected them scrupulously. Papillon was not a killer at that time, but he fell foul of the police and when he was taken up on the charge of murdering a ponce he was convicted. The perjury of a witness for the prosecution, the thick stupidity of the jury, the utter inhumanity of the prosecuting counsel, and the total injustice of the sentence maddened him, for like many of his friends he had a far more acute sense of justice than is usual in the bourgeois world. What is more, the sentence was appallingly severe—transportation to the penal settlements in French Guiana and imprisonment for life without a hope of remission: and all this at the age of twenty-five. He swore he would not serve it, and he did not serve it. This book is an account of his astonishing escapes from an organization that was nevertheless accustomed to holding on to thousands of very tough and determined men, and of the adventures that were the consequences of his escapes. But it is also a furious protest against a society that can use human beings so, that can reduce them to despair and that can for its own convenience shut them up in dim concrete cells with bars only at the top, there to live in total silence upon a starvation diet until they are tamed, driven mad or physically destroyed—killed. The horrible, absolutely convincing account of his years in solitary confinement is very deeply moving indeed.

After years on the run, years of being taken and then escaping again even though he was on the 'very dangerous' list, Papillon finally got away from Devil's Island itself, riding over many miles of sea to the mainland on a couple of sacks filled with coconuts. He managed to reach Venezuela, and eventually the Venezuelans gave him his chance, allowing him to become a Venezuelan citizen and to settle down to live in Caracas as quietly as his fantastic vitality would allow.

It was here that he chanced upon Albertine Sarrazin's wonderful *l'Astragale* in a French bookshop. He read it. The red band round the cover said *123rd thousand*, and Papillon said, 'It's pretty good: but if that chick, just going from hideout to hideout with that broken bone of hers, could sell 123,000 copies, why, with my thirty years of adventures, I'll sell three times as many.' He bought two schoolboy's exercise books with spiral bindings and in two days he filled them. He bought eleven more, and in a couple of months they too were full.

It is perhaps this extraordinary flow that accounts for some of the unique living quality of the book. A professional writer who puts down between one and two thousand words a day is doing very well:

Papillon must have written about five thousand a day, and the result is very like the flow of a practised raconteur—indeed the book has been called a masterpiece of oral literature, and although this is not Mauriac's view, with the utmost diffidence I (having lived with *Papillon* for months) venture to agree with it.

As luck would have it the manuscript was sent to Jean-Pierre Castelnau, the publisher who had discovered Albertine Sarrazin; and here I quote from his preface.

His manuscript reached me in September. Three weeks later Charrière was in Paris. Jean-Jacques Pauvert and I had launched Albertine: Charrière entrusted me with his book. . . .

I have left this book, poured red-hot from his glowing memory and typed by various enthusiastic but not always very French hands, virtually untouched. All I have done is to put some order into the punctuation, change a few almost incomprehensible Spanish turns of phrase, and straighten out certain muddles and inversions that arise from his daily use of three or four different languages in Caracas, all learnt by ear.

I can vouch for the basic authenticity of the book. Charrière came to Paris twice and we talked a great deal. Whole days: and some nights too. Clearly, in thirty years some details may have grown dim and memory may have altered others. They are not of any importance. As for the background, one has but to glance at Professor Devèze's *Cayenne (Collection Archives, Julliard, 1965)* to see that Charrière has by no means exaggerated either the way of life and morality of the penal settlement or its horror. Far from it.

As a matter of principle we have changed the names of all the convicts, warders and governors of the prison service, this book's intention being not to attack individuals but to describe given characters and a given community. We have done the same with the dates: some are exact, others merely give a general notion of the period. That is all that is required.

Perhaps I should add something about the translation of the book. To begin with it was one of the hardest I have ever undertaken, partly because Papillon could not get into his stride, and I had to stumble along with him, for I resent 'improvements' in translation—they do not seem to me right. (Once, in one of my own novels, an Italian translator improved a difficult poem right out of existence.)

And then there was the problem of his slang: Papillon does not use very much—nothing to compare with Albertine Sarrazin or Céline, for example—and it offers no great difficulty from the point of view of comprehension; but what he does use is strongly alive, far more immediate and personal than the comparatively limited vocabulary of the English underworld. So I was obliged to draw upon the more copious and vivid American: but then Papillon's prison days were in the thirties and forties, so the slang had to belong to that period. Occasionally I have fallen into anachronism rather than sacrifice vividness, but on the whole I think the language, particularly the dialogue is a reasonably faithful reflection of the original. Then again there was the question of obscenities. French of course makes a very free use of expressions such as *con* and *merde* whose literal equivalents are less often heard in English and therefore have a rather stronger effect; but on the other hand no one can be so simple as to suppose that thousands of ill-treated convicts herded together sound anything like a Sunday-school, so I have tried to steer between unnecessary grossness and inaccurate insipidity.

By the time I had settled these points Papillon had thoroughly hit his stride, and then I found that the best way of following his breakneck pace was to keep up with him. It is a pace that I am used to, for I have lived half my life among the most loquacious people in France, and although I could not translate quite as fast as Papillon wrote, I still finished the book in three months, treating it (to use Jean-Pierre Castelnau's words) as the flow of 'a sunlit, rather husky southern voice that you can listen to for hours on end'. And I may say that although in places it was tough going, all in all it was one of the most full and rewarding experiences in a literary life that has not been sparing in delights.

PATRICK O'BRIAN

*Collioure, 1970*





PAPILLON



# First Exercise-Book



# Down the Drain

5-676

## THE ASSIZES

THE blow was such a stunner that it was thirteen years before I could get back on to my feet again. It was not the usual kind of blow either, and they clubbed together to let me have it.

This was 26 October 1931. At eight in the morning they had taken me out of my cell in the Conciergerie—the cell I had been living in for the past year. I was well shaved and well dressed: I looked as smooth as they come in my made-to-measure suit and white shirt with a pale-blue bow-tie to add the finishing touch.

I was twenty-five and I looked twenty. The gendarmes were rather impressed by my posh clothes, and they treated me civilly. They even took off the handcuffs. There we were, all six of us, the five gendarmes and me, sitting on two benches in a bare room. A dreary sky outside. The door opposite us must lead into the assize-court, for this building, this Paris building, was the Palais de Justice of the Seine.

In a few moments I was to be indicted for wilful homicide. My counsel, *Maitre Raymond Hubert*, came in to see me. 'There's no solid evidence against you: I fully expect us to be acquitted.' That 'us' made me smile. Anyone would have thought that *Maitre Hubert* was going to appear in the dock too, and that if the verdict was guilty he too would have to serve time.

An usher opened the door and told us to come in. With four gendarmes round me and the sergeant to one side, I made my entrance through the wide-open double doors into an enormous court-room. They had done the whole place up in red, blood red, so as to hand me out this crushing blow—all red, the carpets, the curtains at the big windows and even the robes of the judges who were going to deal with me in two or three minutes' time.

'Gentlemen, the court!'

In single file six men appeared through a door on the right. The president of the court and then five other lawyers with their official hats, their toques, on their heads. The presiding judge stopped at the

seat in the middle and his colleagues arranged themselves to the right and the left. There was an impressive silence in the room, and everybody was standing up, including me. The court took its seat, and so did everybody else.

The president was a fat-faced man with pink cheeks and a cold eye; he looked straight at me without letting any sort of feeling show. His name was Bevin. When things were under way he ran the trial fairly and he made it clear to one and all that as a professional lawyer he was not sure that either the witnesses or the police were all that straight. No: he had no responsibility for the crusher: all he did was to pass it on to me.

The public prosecutor was a lawyer called Pradel, and all the barristers were frightened of him. He had the evil reputation of sending more victims to the guillotine and the convict prisons in France and overseas than any other man.

Pradel stood for the vindication of society. He was the official prosecutor and there was nothing human about him. He represented the Law, the scales of justice: he was the one who handled them, and he did everything he possibly could to make them come down on the right side for him. He lowered the lids over his vulturish eyes and stared at me piercingly from his full height. From the height of his rostrum in the first place, which made him tower over me, and then from his own natural height, an arrogant six feet. He did not take off his red robe, but he put his toque down in front of him, and he leaned on his two great ham-sized hands. There was a gold ring to show he was married, and a ring on his little finger made of a highly polished horseshoe nail.

He leant over a little so as to dominate me all the more, and he looked as though he were saying, 'If you think you can get away from me, young cock, you've got it wrong. My hands may not look like talons, but there are claws in my heart that are going to rip you to pieces. And the reason why all the barristers are afraid of me, the reason why the judges think the world of me as a dangerous prosecutor, is that I never let my prey escape. It's nothing to do with me whether you're guilty or innocent: all I'm here for is to make use of everything that can be said against you—your disreputable, shiftless life in Montmartre, the evidence the police have worked up and the statements of the police themselves. What I am to do is to take hold of all the disgusting filth piled up by the investigating magistrate and manage

to make you look so revolting that the jury will see that you vanish from the community.' Either I was dreaming or I could hear him perfectly distinctly: this man-eater really shook me. 'Prisoner at the bar, just you keep quiet, and above all don't you attempt to defend yourself. I'll send you down the drain, all right. And I trust you've no faith in the jury? Don't you kid yourself. Those twelve men know nothing whatsoever about life. Look at them, lined up there opposite you. Twelve bastards brought up to Paris from some perishing village in the country: can you see them clearly? Small shopkeepers, pensioners, tradesmen. It's not worth describing them to you in detail. Surely you don't expect *them* to understand the life you lead in Montmartre or what it's like to be twenty-five? As far as they're concerned Pigalle and the Place Blanche are exactly the same as hell and all night-birds are the natural enemies of society. They are all unspeakably proud of being jurymen at the Seine Assizes. And what's more, I can tell you that they loathe their status—they loathe belonging to the pinched, dreary lower middle class. And now you make your appearance here, all young and handsome. Do you really suppose for a moment that I'm not going to make them see you as a night-prowling Montmartre Don Juan? That will put them dead against you right away. You're too well dressed: you ought to have come in something very modest indeed. That was a huge tactical error of yours. Can't you see how jealous of your suit they are? They all buy their clothes off the peg—they've never even dreamt of having a suit made to measure by a tailor.'

Ten o'clock, and we were all ready for the trial to start. Six official lawyers there in front of me, one of them a fierce, driving prosecutor who was going to use all his Machiavellian strength and all his intelligence to convince these twelve innocents that in the first place I was guilty and in the second that the only proper sentence was either penal servitude or the guillotine.

I was to be tried for the killing of a pimp, a police-informer belonging to the Montmartre underworld. There was no proof, but the cops (who get credit every time they find out who has committed a crime) were going to swear blind that I was guilty. Seeing they had no proof, they said they had 'confidential' information that left the matter in no doubt. The strongest piece of the prosecution's evidence was a witness they had primed, a human gramophone-record manufactured at 36 quai des Orfèvres, their headquarters—a guy by the name of Polein. At one



point, when I was saying over and over again that I did not know him, the president very fairly asked me, 'You say this witness is lying. Very well. But why should he want to lie?'

'Monsieur le Président, I've had sleepless nights ever since I was arrested, but not out of remorse for having killed Roland le Petit, because I never did it. It's because I keep trying to make out what kind of motive this witness can have for attacking me so ferociously and for bringing fresh evidence to support the charge every time it seems to weaken. I've come to the conclusion, Monsieur le Président, that the police picked him up in the act of committing some serious crime and that they made a bargain with him—we'll forget it, so long as you denounce Papillon.'

At the time I didn't think I was so close to the truth. A few years later this Polein, who had been held up at the assizes as an honest man with no criminal record, was arrested and found guilty of peddling cocaine.

Maitre Hubert tried to defend me, but he was not up to the size of the prosecutor. Maitre Bouffay, with his warm-hearted indignation, was the only one to make Pradel struggle for a while. But it didn't last, and the prosecutor's skill soon got him on top again. What's more, he flattered the jury, who swelled with pride at being treated as equals and as colleagues by this awe-inspiring character.

By eleven o'clock at night the game of chess was over. It was checkmate for my counsel. And I, an innocent man—I was found guilty.

In the person of Pradel, the public prosecutor, Society wiped out a young man of twenty-five for the term of his natural life. And none of your reductions, thank you very much! It was the president, Bevin, who handed me out this overflowing dish.

'Prisoner, stand up,' he said in a toneless voice.

I got to my feet. There was a complete silence in the court; people were holding their breath, and my heart beat a little faster. Some jurymen watched me; others hung their heads; they looked ashamed.

'Prisoner, since the jury has answered yes to all the questions except for that of premeditation, you are sentenced to undergo penal servitude for life. Have you anything to say?'

I did not flinch; I stood there naturally; all I did was to grip the bar of the dock a little harder. 'Yes, Monsieur le Président: what I have to

say is that I am truly innocent and that I am the victim of a plot worked up by the police.' I heard a murmur from the place where there were some fashionably-dressed women, distinguished visitors, sitting behind the judges. Without raising my voice I said to them, 'Shut up, you rich women who come here for dirty thrills. The farce is over. A murder has been solved by your clever police and your system of justice—you've had what you came for.'

'Warders,' said the President, 'take the prisoner away.'

Before I vanished I heard a voice calling out, 'Don't you worry, sweetheart. I'll come out there and find you.' It was my brave, splendid Nénette giving full voice to her love. In the body of the court my friends of the underworld applauded. They knew perfectly well what to think about this killing, and this was their way of showing me that they were proud I had not given anything away or put the blame on anybody else.

Once we were back in the little room where we had been before the trial the gendarmes put the handcuffs on me, and one of them arranged a short chain, fixing my right wrist to his left. Not a word. I asked for a cigarette. The sergeant gave me one and lit it for me. Every time I took it out or put it back to my mouth the gendarme had to raise his arm or lower it to follow my movement.

I stood there until I had smoked about three-quarters of the cigarette. No one uttered a sound. I was the one who looked at the sergeant and said, 'Let's go.'

Down the stairs, surrounded by a dozen gendarmes, and I came to the inner yard of the law-courts. Our black maria was waiting for us there. It was not the sort with compartments: we sat on benches, about ten of us. The sergeant said, 'Conciergerie.'

## THE CONCIERGERIE

When we reached this last of Marie-Antoinette's palaces, the gendarmes handed me over to the head warder, who signed a paper, their receipt. They went off without saying anything, but before they left the sergeant shook my two handcuffed hands. Surprise!

The head warder said to me, 'What did they give you?'

'Life.'

'It's not true?' He looked at the gendarmes and saw that it was true.

This fifty-year-old warder had seen plenty and he knew all about my business: he had the decency to say this to me—'The bastards! They must be out of their minds!'

Gently he took off my handcuffs, and he was good-hearted enough to take me to the padded cell himself, one of those kept specially for men condemned to death, for lunatics, very dangerous prisoners and those who have been given penal servitude.

'Keep your heart up, Papillon,' he said, closing the door on me. 'We'll send you some of your things and the food from your other cell. Cheer up!'

'Thanks, chief. My heart's all right, believe me; I hope their penal bleeding servitude will choke them.'

A few minutes later there was a scratching outside the door. 'What's up?' I said.

'Nothing,' said a voice. 'It's only me putting a card on the door.'

'Why? What's it say?'

'Penal servitude for life. To be watched closely.'

They're crazy, I thought: do they really suppose that this ton of bricks falling on my head is going to worry me to the point of committing suicide? I am brave and I always shall be brave. I'll fight everyone and everything. I'll start right away, tomorrow.

As I drank my coffee the next day I wondered whether I should appeal. What was the point? Should I have any better luck coming up before another court? And how much time would it waste? A year: maybe eighteen months. And all for what—getting twenty years instead of life?

As I had thoroughly made up my mind to escape, the number of years did not count: I remembered what a sentenced prisoner had said to an assize judge. 'Monsieur, how many years does penal servitude for life last in France?'

I paced up and down my cell. I had sent one wire to comfort my wife and another to a sister who, alone against the world, had done her best to defend her brother. It was over: the curtain had fallen. My people must suffer more than me, and far away in the country my poor father would find it very hard to bear so heavy a cross.

Suddenly my breath stopped: *but I was innocent!* I was indeed; but for whom? Yes, who was I innocent for? I said to myself, above all don't you ever arse about telling people you're innocent: you'll only get laughed at. Getting life on account of a ponce and then saying it

was somebody else that took him apart would be too bleeding comic. Just you keep your trap shut.

All the time I had been inside waiting for trial, both at the Santé and the Conciergerie, it had never occurred to me that I could possibly get a sentence like this, so I had never really thought about what 'going down the drain' might be like.

All right. The first thing to do was to get in touch with men who had already been sentenced, men who might later be companions in a break. I picked upon Dega, a guy from Marseilles. I'd certainly see him at the barber's. He went there every day to get a shave. I asked to go too. Sure enough, when I came in I found him standing there with his nose to the wall. I saw him just as he was making another man move round him so as to have longer to wait for his turn. I got in right next to him, shoving someone else aside. Quickly I whispered, 'You OK, Dega?'

'OK, Papi. I got fifteen years. What about you? They say you really copped it.'

'Yes: I got life.'

'You'll appeal?'

'No. The thing to do is to eat well and to keep fit. Keep your strength up, Dega: we'll certainly need good muscles. Are you loaded?'

'Yes. I've got ten bags\* in pounds sterling. And you?'

'No.'

'Here's a tip: get loaded quick. Your counsel was Hubert, wasn't he? He's a square and he'd never bring you in your charger. Send your wife with it, well filled, to Dante's. Tell her to give it to Dominique le Ruche and I guarantee it'll reach you.'

'Ssh. The screw's watching us.'

'So we're having a break for gossip, are we?' asked the screw.

'Oh, nothing serious,' said Dega. 'He's telling me he's sick.'

'What's the matter with him? Assizes colic?' And the fat-arm choked with laughter.

That was life all right. I was on the way down the drain, a place where you howl with laughter, making crack about twenty-five who has been sentenced for the whole of the

I got the charger. It was a beautifully polished and

unscrewed exactly in the middle. It had a little

There was 5,600 francs in new notes inside. When

kissed it: yes, I kissed this three-and-a-half

\* 10,000 francs

10  
a poor  
one of

## DOWN THE DRAIN

...re shoving it into my anus. I drew a deep breath so that it should  
right up to my colon. It was my safe-deposit. They could strip me;  
make me open my legs, make me cough and bend double, but they  
could never find out whether I had anything. It went up very high into  
my big intestine. It was part of me. This was life and freedom that I  
was carrying inside me—the path to revenge. For I was thoroughly  
determined to have my revenge. Indeed, revenge was all I thought of.

It was dark outside. I was alone in the cell. A strong ceiling light let  
the screw see me through the little hole in the door. It dazzled me, this  
light. I laid my folded handkerchief over my eyes, for it really hurt. I  
was lying on a mattress on an iron bed—no pillow—and all the details  
of that horrible trial passed through my mind.

Now at this point perhaps I have to be a little tedious, but in order  
to make the rest of this long tale understandable and in order to  
thoroughly explain what kept me going in my struggle I must tell  
everything that came into my mind at that point, everything I really  
saw with my mind's eye during those first days when I was a man who  
had been buried alive.

How was I going to set about things once I had escaped? Because  
now that I possessed my charger I hadn't a second's doubt that I was  
going to escape. In the first place I should get back to Paris as fast  
possible. The first one to kill would be Polein, the false witness. Then  
the two cops in charge of the case. But just two cops was not enough.  
I ought to kill the lot. All the cops. Or at least as many as possible.  
I had the right idea. Once out, I would get back to Paris. I'd see  
trunk with explosive. As much as it would hold. Ten, twenty, or  
forty pounds: I wasn't sure quite how much. And I began working  
out what it would take to kill a great many people.

Dynamite? No, cheddite was better. And why not nitroglycerine?  
Right, I'd get advice from the people inside who knew more  
than me. But the cops could really rely upon me to provide  
coming to them, and no short measure, either.

I still had my eyes closed, with the handkerchief keeping  
shut. Very clearly I could see the trunk, apparently innocently  
crammed with explosives, and the exactly set alarm-clock  
fire the detonator. Take care: it had to go off at ten in the  
the assembly room of the Police Judiciaire\* on the first

\* The branch of the police particularly concerned with crime.

quai des Orfèvres. At that moment there would be at least a hundred and fifty cops gathered to hear the report and to get their orders. How many steps to go up? I mustn't get it wrong.

I should have to work out the exact time it would take for the trunk to get up from the street to the place where it was to explode—work it out to the second. And who was going to carry it? OK: I'd get it in by bluff. I'd take a cab to the door of the Police Judiciaire and in a commanding voice I'd say to the two slops on guard, 'Take this trunk up to the assembly room for me: I'll follow. Tell Commissaire Dupont that it's from Inspecteur chef Dubois, and that I'll be there right away.'

But would they obey? What if I chanced upon the only two intelligent types among all those idiots? In that case it was no go. I'd have to find something else. Again and again I racked my brains. Deep inside I had no doubt that I should succeed in finding some hundred per cent certain way of doing it.

I got up for a drink of water. All that thinking had given me a headache. I lay down again without the cloth over my eyes: slowly the minutes dropped by. That light, dear God above, that light! I wetted the handkerchief and put it on again. The cold water felt good, and being heavier now the handkerchief fitted better over my eyelids. I would always do it that way from now on.

Those long hours during which I worked out my future revenge were so vivid that I could see myself carrying it out exactly as though the thing was actually being done. All through those nights and even during part of every day, there I was, moving about Paris, as though my escape was something that had already happened. I was dead certain that I should escape and that I should get back to Paris. And of course the first thing to do was to square the account with Polein: and after him, the cops. And what about the members of the jury? Were those bastards to go on living in peace? The poor silly bastards must have gone home very pleased with themselves for having carried out their duty with a capital D. Stuffed with their own importance, they would lord it over their neighbours and their drabble-tailed wives, who would have kept supper back for them.

OK. What was I to do about the jurymen? Nothing. They were poor dreary half-wits. They were in no way fitted to be judges. If one of them was a retired gendarme or a customs-man, he would react like a gendarme or a customs-man. And if he was a milkman, then he'd act like any other dim-wit peddler. They had gone right along with the

public prosecutor and he had had no sort of difficulty in bowling them over. They weren't really answerable. So that was settled: I'd do them no harm whatsoever.

As I write these thoughts that came to me so vividly all those years ago and that now come crowding back with such terrible clarity, I remember how intensely total silence and complete solitariness can stimulate an imaginary life, when it is inflicted upon a young man shut up in a cell—how it can stimulate the imagination before the whole thing turns to madness. So intense and vivid a life that a man literally divides himself into two people. He takes wing and he quite genuinely wanders wherever he feels inclined to go. His home, his father, mother, family, his childhood—all the various stages of his life. And then even more, there are all those castles in Spain that appear in his fertile mind with such an unbelievable vividness that he really comes to believe that he is living through everything that he dreams.

Thirty-six years have passed, and yet recording everything that came into my head at that moment of my life does not need the slightest effort.

No: I should do the members of the jury no harm: my pen races along. But what about the prosecuting counsel? I must not miss him, not at any cost. In any case, I had a ready-made recipe for him, straight out of Alexandre Dumas. Just like in *The Count of Monte Christo*, and the guy they shoved into the cellar and let die of hunger.

As for that lawyer, yes, he was answerable all right. That red-robed vulture—there was everything in favour of putting him to death in the most hideous manner possible. Yes, that was what I should do: after Polein and the cops, I should devote my whole time to dealing with this creep. I'd rent a villa. It'd have to have a really deep cellar with thick walls and a very solid door. If the door wasn't thick enough I should soundproof it myself with a mattress and tow. Once I had the villa I'd work out his movements and then kidnap him. The rings would be all ready in the wall, so I'd chain him up straight away. And then which of us was going to have fun?

I had him directly opposite me: under my closed eyelids I could see him with extraordinary exactness. Yes, I looked at him just as he had looked at me in court. The scene was so clear and distinct that I could feel the warmth of his breath on my face; for I was very close, face to face, almost touching him. His hawk's eyes were dazzled and terrified by the beam of a very powerful headlight I had focused on him. Great

drops of sweat ran down his red, swollen face. I could hear my questions and I listened to his replies. I experienced that moment very vividly.

'Do you recognize me, you sod? I'm Papillon. Papillon, the guy you so cheerfully sent down the line for life. You sweated over your books for years and years so as to be a highly educated man; you spent your nights doing Roman law and all that jazz; you learnt Latin and Greek and you sacrificed your youth so as to become a great speaker. Do you think it was worth it? Where did it get you, you silly bastard? What did it help you do? To work out new, decent laws for the community? To persuade the people that peace is the finest thing on earth? To preach the philosophy of some terrific religion? Or even to use your influence, your superior college education, to persuade others to be better people or at least stop being wicked? Tell me, have you used your knowledge to pull men out of the water or to drown them? You've never helped a soul: you've only had one single motive—ambition! Up, up. Up the steps of your lousy career. The penal settlements' best provider, the unlimited supplier of the executioner and the guillotine—that's your glory. If Deibler\* had any sense of gratitude he'd send you a case of the best champagne every New Year. Isn't it thanks to you, you bleeding son of a bitch, that he's been able to lop off five or six more heads in the past twelve months? Anyhow, now I'm the one that's got you, chained good and hard to this wall. I can just see the way you grinned, yes, I can see your triumphant look when they read out my sentence after your speech for the prosecution. It seems only yesterday, and yet it was years ago. How many? Ten years? Twenty?'

But what was happening to me? Why ten years? Why twenty? Get a hold on yourself, Papillon; you're young, you're strong, and you've got five thousand six hundred francs in your gut. Two years, yes. I'd do two years out of my life sentence, and no more: I swore that to myself.

Snap out of it, Papillon, you're going crazy. The silence and this cell are driving you out of your mind. I've got no cigarettes. Finished the last yesterday. I'll start walking. After all, I don't have to have my eyes closed or my handkerchief over them to see what goes on. That's it; I'm on my feet. The cell's four yards long from the door to the wall—that is to say five short paces. I began walking, my hands behind

\* The executioner in 1932.



my back. And I went on again, 'All right. As I was saying, I can see your triumphant look quite distinctly. Well, I'm going to change it for you: into something quite different. In one way it's easier for you than it was for me. I couldn't shout out, but you can. Shout just as much as you like; shout as loud as you like. What am I going to do to you? Dumas' recipe? Let you die of hunger, you sod? No: that's not enough. To start with I'll just put out your eyes. Eh? You still look triumphant, do you? You think that if I put your eyes out at least you'll have the advantage of not seeing me any longer, and that I'll be deprived of the pleasure of seeing the terror in them. Yes, you're right: I mustn't put them out. At least not right away. That'll be for later. I'll cut your tongue out, though, that terrible cutting tongue of yours, sharp as a knife; no, sharper—as sharp as a razor. The tongue that you prostituted to your splendid career. The same tongue that says pretty things to your wife, your kids and your girl-friend. Girl-friend? Boy-friend, more likely. Much more likely. You couldn't be anything but a passive, flabby pouffe. That's right: I must begin by doing away with your tongue, because next to your brain that's what does the damage. You use it very well, you know: so well you could persuade the jury to answer yes to the questions put to them. So well that you could make the cops look like they were straight and devoted to their duty: so well that that witness's cock and balls seemed to hold water. So well that those twelve bastards thought I was the most dangerous man in Paris. If you hadn't possessed this false, skilful, persuasive tongue, so practised at distorting people and facts and things, I should still be sitting there on the terrace of the Grand Café in the Place Blanche, and I'd never have had to stir. So we're all agreed, then, that I'm going to rip this tongue of yours right out. But what'll I do it with?'

I paced on and on and on. My head was spinning, but there I was, still face to face with him, when suddenly the electricity went out and a very faint ray of daylight made its way into the cell through the boarded window.

What? Morning already? Had I spent the whole night with my revenge? What splendid hours they had been! How that long, long night had flown by!

Sitting on my bed, I listened. Nothing. The most total silence. Now and then a little click at my door. It was the warder, wearing slippers so as to make no sound, opening the little metal flap and putting his eye to the peep-hole that let him see me without my being able to see him.